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From "Telling"

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from *Telling*

Telling was first produced in Eugene, Oregon in February 2008. Co-authors Jonathan Wei and Max Rayneard conducted interviews with twenty-two Eugene veterans and military family members, and from these interviews created the script for Telling. The play was performed by eleven of the interviewees themselves. From this initial production, The Telling Project, a program of productions across the nation based on the Eugene model, was born.

ACT ONE

[Lemuel Charley speaks over PA into the dark.]

Lemuel Charley

Let me tell you the story about how I learned the barrel of a gun gets hot. I grew up on the rez in New Mexico during the Hopi/Navajo land dispute. At that time, the government was sayin' that if you were Navajo and you lived on Hopi land, or if you were Hopi livin' on Navajo land, you had to move. And my dad was one of those. We had to drive all the way across Hopi land to get home. So we'd be drivin' home at night sometimes and they'd start shootin' at us. Totally dark, and you could hear the shots comin' for us. My dad, he'd grab me by the back of the neck and shove me down to the floorboards of the truck. And he'd shoot back. Then he'd hand me the gun and tell me to reload it. And let me tell you, that barrel got fuckin' hot.

So when I first hit the ground in Kuwait, and we were takin' fire for the first time, I thought to myself: "I know this."

[Beat. The lights up as the cast enters from both sides of the stage, moves downstage to stand in a line facing the audience. Beat. The cast moves upstage, assuming various postures, and then moves downstage in waves, asking, one by one, whatever questions occur to them at the moment of performance.]

Cast

Will I ever be normal?

What have I gotten myself into?

Does she think of me?

Is he going to be okay over there?

Will I ever feel okay again?

Am I smart enough to be in college?

Do they miss me?

Am I going to come home again?

Will I ever be normal again?

Am I cut out for this?

Should I have joined in the first place?

Am I a leader?

. . .

Patrice Baker

When I think of why I joined, there are so many things. My older brother left for the Army a year before I did. He went in '99. My parents didn't think I was Army material. I was always a girly-girl. I was a dancer. My hair and make-up was the most important thing to me in high school. And boyfriends. So, they were, "Oh, she couldn't do the Army, she can't do that kind of thing."

So, I graduated from high school on a Wednesday, I got married that Saturday and I left for basic training two weeks later. I really can't remember what we did for those two weeks. We had a really small wedding and I think we got like \$600 from presents and we just pretty much blew it.

My husband drove me to the airport to see me off. I pretty much cried all the way there. My plane got delayed. When I finally got to Atlanta, I had to stay the night in a hotel all by myself. I ate breakfast and dinner by myself. All I could do was think about everything, and it was just so emotional. I didn't want to lose my husband. We married too early. Me leaving is what forced us to get married early. I mean I was eighteen, he was nineteen at the time. So it was really the fear that my trying to make my life better was going to push him away. That was my big fear.

...

Shirley Cortez

This isn't your mommy's house any more! This is the Marines!

[The recruits rush about and, under the watchful gaze of the drill sergeants, set up stools and have their hair cut.]

Steve Brattain

The funniest thing is, uh, right before I went to basic, I got my hair cut real short, like the shortest I'd ever had it cut, right. And I'm like, "I'm gonna be ahead of the game." Of course, a week into it they're like "breeoow" and shave your whole head. And then of course, they charge you five bucks for it. And you're like, "I'm bleeding."

...

Patrice

I got injured my first week of training. But I didn't get out until the end of the sixth week. It happened on...have you ever seen *Renaissance Man* with Danny DeVito? Eighties movie? No? Well, he's on this...it's called Victory Tower, it's the first week, it was so much fun. You climb up ropes, you rappel down the wall. And you're supposed to pull yourself over this series of ropes. And I pulled my groin muscle on that. And it kind of hurt, but I didn't really notice it.

And then it was maybe a day or two later and we were doing PT, and my groin just kind of snapped. I just felt this horrible pain. And

I was just holding myself. I was trying to explain to the drill sergeant that I had hurt my groin area, but I didn't want to say "groin," so I was like "here"...

[She rubs her hip.]

...and he was like "oh, you mean your hip" and I'm like, "No. Lower!" and I'm trying to...you know, I had all guy drill sergeants and I wasn't comfortable saying.

They sent me to sick call. I could walk, but I'd never felt this kind of pain before. They did an X-ray. They didn't see anything so they just gave me Motrin and sent me out. I pretty much went back to sick call every week or twice a week for the next six weeks. It kept getting worse and I kept telling them there was something wrong.

...

Jason Alves

Throughout boot camp, I was counting Sundays. 'Cuz Sundays we went to church. I'm not very religious, but in boot camp I became religious. I was like, "Jesus please..." Every day I was like, "God if you get me through this day, I will *build a church*. If I don't, I'll go to hell."

...

Patrice

What I found out later was that the muscle was pulled, and when the muscle keeps getting pulled it keeps rubbing. It caused two stress fractures on the outside right of my pubic bone and one on the inside. I kept saying to them, "something's really wrong," and they just kind of ignore you. There's just so many soldiers coming through that they need to get you out as quick as possible. The whole joke was "Oh, you broke your arm, here's some Motrin, go on out." What I found out years later was that I had a stress fracture in my left ankle from compensating all those weeks.

I wanted to be a part of it and my parents told me I couldn't do it. Leaving would be admitting defeat. I was trying to find answers. And I remember sitting outside. I was like, waiting for the Universe,

or God, or whoever was out there just to tell me what to do. And it just came to me that I needed to leave. I had a three-year contract. I was supposed to get out right when we invaded Iraq, so I wouldn't have got out. I would have been in Iraq.

I should have been out there.

. . .

Josh Coombs

Dude, there's somethin' I always wanted to say to you but I was afraid to do it.

Shane Addis

What's that?

Josh

Dude, I'm sorry I was...I was such a bitch in boot camp.

Shane

What?

Josh

Yeah, you know. The cryin' and shit.

Shane

What are you talkin' about, dude? We were all bitches. I cried too. You just didn't see it.

Josh

Really?

Shane

Yeah.

Josh

All right.

Shane

You wanna go get a drink?

Josh
Okay.

[They exit.]

ACT TWO

[Silence. Jeremy, drunk, weaves across the stage. Christina crosses behind. They stand opposite downstage, facing the audience. Jeremy sings sloppily to himself. He stops mid-phrase.]

Jeremy Coombs
Yep.

Christina Coombs
He was bald at the time, which I really like.

Jeremy
If you want to go out with me, you go out with my friends.

Christina
He was a little bit arrogant.

Jeremy
I love you.

Christina
He was quite intoxicated.

Jeremy
Uh, anything I said last night, just forget all about it.

Christina
I don't think he remembered what he'd said. And, okay, so, I wasn't too attached because we were supposed to get together right before he left, and that Saturday he never called. And so, I kinda felt like, okay, that's the end of that.
So, for about six months I didn't hear anything.

Jeremy

I just wanted to say that I've been thinking about you a lot. And... well, I'm going to Iraq in a week. And when I come back, I was wondering if you wanted to get together.

Christina

I would like that a lot.

[She turns to the audience.]

I felt like that was the man that I knew under everything. I think he was very misogynistic at the time. I think he'd been hurt by a couple of women and so he just shut down to the idea of women being good. The military was also about nothing being attached. We're here for our brothers, and that's what we're here for, and to have someone back at home distracts. I was in that place where we were just going to be together for a while and then we'd go our separate ways. And then he had something big to do. I think it clicked a little bit, but there was the question, is he going to come back and be that way, like, the phone call way? Or is he going to be the other way? And then, a sense of, is he going to be okay over there? And watching the news and thinking, is that him? He was kind of more to me like a friend.

[Josh and Shane enter and cross the stage behind Christina and Jeremy.]

Jeremy

It's always the transfer that's hardest.

Josh

I'm in Maine!

Christina

I just remember sort of charting this.

Shane

I'm in Ireland!

Jeremy

Abstractly, remotely, and feeling totally disconnected.

Josh

I'm in Germany!

Shane

I think I'm home.

Christina

Like, one long held breath.

. . .

Jeremy

First stop was Nasaria. That was really shitty.

Then Alkut, did some more stuff there, then west into Baghdad. We started hitting all the ghettos. We celebrated one guy's citizenship. It was like, "Woo-hoo, congratulations. This sucks."

Nothing prepares you for combat. And I wasn't the best Marine in the world. I'd be fumbling with something, like, shit where's my other magazine. Or my gas mask would fall out.

But when we were rolling through Saddam City, it was flowers. People come up to us and offer whiskey, food. Flowers. Plates of these dates, these huge, thick dates that came straight off the tree in their front yard. One time, we were guarding this hospital, and this kid came up to me with this makeshift American flag across his shirt, it had like, two stars on it. And his dad was standing behind him, nudging him forward. You could just see the pride in his eyes.

Another time, we went into a school, found this huge pile of weapons and ammunition, cleaned it out—destroyed everything. It was like, that's a whole bunch of stuff that was no longer on the street.

A woman came up to me once, prayer beads in her hand, weeping. "Why didn't you come sooner? They took my son. They killed my son. Why didn't you come sooner?"

Or, you'd be in these neighborhoods with these huge, like, two-story suburban homes like you'd find in Southern California.

Beautiful homes. And behind them was this wall, and behind this wall was the worst ghetto you could possibly imagine, worse than anything you see here. There were pipes that went from one side of the wall, the wealthy side, to the other, carrying the sewage from these beautiful houses into the ghetto. And that's where sixty percent of the population lived, in the filth of this small minority. After we rolled through, it was like, they have a chance now, they don't have to live like that anymore.

And the children. God! Let me tell you about the children.

[Beat.]

But that was a different time. It was a different time.

Josh and Shane bring over their chairs and sit behind Jeremy who joins them.]

Texas hold 'em is huge over there.

Shane

Books, video games.

Josh

Porn.

Jeremy

Volleyball.

Josh

Foot fetish porn.

Shane

I was the ping-pong champion of Al Asad.

Josh

Amateur porn.

Shane

Strawberry Shortcake.

[Beat—all look at Shane.]

No, really—this is classic. See, I was first in Al Asad, with the advance party, in charge of settin' the place up, finding a permanent place, makin' it comfortable for when the rest of the company arrives.

And the previous company must have left it, but there was this... this gem. It was pink. It was heart-shaped. It was so...so soft. It was a Strawberry Shortcake pillow, with this face on it, all smiling and kind of like this.

[Shane does a Strawberry Shortcake imitation.]

I can't really do it justice. But trust me, it was adorable.

Anyway, I saw this thing and I was like, this is a find, this is a rarity. 'Cuz I knew when the rest of the company showed up, they'd be exhausted—just traveled like fifty hours or somethin' like that, they'd be all crashed out.

So, what did I do? I had my camera, and I'd come around, find these Marines sound asleep on their racks. Heads shaved, fatigues, some of them drooling a little. And Strawberry Shortcake, all cuddled up. Cha-chik! [Mimics taking a picture.] Cha-chik! Made an album. It was adorable.

...

Josh

It was Ash Wednesday, second week I was there—everybody in my family knows what this day means from my time in Iraq. It was 7:12 p.m., it was dark, we were getting ready to go to chow. So, we meet up next to one of these HESCOs. In case you don't know what a HESCO is, it's a four-foot by four-foot by four-foot concrete cube filled with sand, and they stack 'em one, two, and three high. So, we have our rifles, kevlar, no flaks, our utilities. We're running to catch the bus to chow, 'cuz we see the bus coming and if we don't catch it we'll have to hump it a quarter-mile to the chow hall. So,

I'm jogging along to catch the bus, and I hear off to the right this "bff." Everybody was like, "What the hell was that?" But we keep jogging along. All of a sudden, just to my left, there was this loud "BOOM!"

It was so close I could actually feel the heat and the concussive blast of it on the side of my face. Like, it actually stopped me and I, you know, kinda stumbled. And the first thought that went through my mind was, "We're dead. This is it. That was too close. We're fucked." It felt like I stood there for ten minutes. In reality I stood there for about five seconds. And I realized eventually, not dead, but there could be a third mortar.

So, I ran to the nearest HESCO and got up against it like this, sort of *Saving Private Ryan* style, trying to minimize myself as a target. But I was standing, I realized, and needed to get down, so I dropped down to one of the HESCOs next to it like this.

[He drops to his knees.]

And I wait. I call for my buddies—they all call back, we're all okay, we find each other and get back to the shop.

[He rises.]

As soon as I got inside my shop, I took off my rifle and threw it down. I broke the screen on my laptop—so I saw later. Didn't realize it at the time. One of my lance corporals asked, "What happened, Sergeant?" And the first thing out of my mouth was, "We just fuckin' got fuckin' hit by some goddamn mortars." Verbatim. Just from shock, 'cuz I do not actually normally cuss that much, unless I'm quoting something. But at that point, it was just a stream, you know. Just, you know, "Fuck goddamn shit Jesus fucking Christ what the fuck!" you know. Nobody would be saying anything, the room would be silent and I'd just, "Fuck!"

We went outside once we got the all-clear—to have a cigarette because what else are you going to do when you've just been killed but have a cigarette, like sex you know—and everybody was outside and we were looking at where the fire was, where the mortar had hit the truck, and somebody says, like, "Yeah, what happened?"

And I was like, "Oh, a mortar hit the truck."

And they were like, “How do you know?”

“Oh, I was right there.”

Which is when it hit me: I was right there. We found out the next day, after the fire had been put out and some of the shrapnel from the blast had been cleared, we did a pace count from where we were to where the mortar hit. It was fourteen yards. The kill radius on a mortar, so I’m told, is fifteen meters. Let me put that in perspective for you. If a mortar dropped in the middle of this room, we’d all be dead.

. . .

[Jeremy and Christina step forward and exchange e-mails.]

Christina

I was in the video store today, and this guy in the line in front of me was talking to the woman at the counter and she said to him, “Yeah, my husband is in Iraq right now.” And I sort of froze, like, oh—right, there are other people here involved in this. Isn’t that weird? I was so alarmed—and so comforted. I didn’t say anything to her, though when I was walking home I really regretted that. I thought I should go back and talk to her. But I can’t go there now.

Jeremy

That’s okay. I understand. Here in our new spot, there are these rose bushes. Nothing else, but these rose bushes. One of the platoon sergeants is really into them, he’s watering them, feeding them, tending them. Get this, at one point, he put a fire watch, an armed guard, on them to make sure no one fucked with his roses. It’s not like he planted these things. I guess it’s just that...sometimes we need to do whatever it takes to...to not be...here.

Christina

You okay?

Jeremy

Yeah. I’m good.

[Christina steps back and Jeremy stands, staying downstage left.]

Jeremy

You see it all. Not so easy to talk about it sometimes.

Shane

Not a big fan of talkin' about it.

Josh

You see the death.

Jeremy

You see it all.

[Shane moves chair to front of stage, sits.]

Shane

The First Sergeant was a big guy, bald, huge guy. A real Harley-riding type. He was responsible for setting the discipline, the sense of duty in the company. He was responsible for me getting promotion to corporal as well. We respected each other. He taught me a lot about bein' a Marine, mentored a lot of Marines.

I talked to him about his kids—he had two kids, his wife. He couldn't wait to get out. Been in a long time, and could just see the light at the end of the tunnel. Smiled so wide when he talked about his family. And he hated goin' on convoy, hated goin' outside the wire, and he didn't have to but he did. He saw it as his duty to be with the CO—that's the kind of guy he was.

So I was on watch. It was two in the morning, been up for twenty hours, and the First Sergeant comes up to go out on convoy. He sees me and he says, "Where's your duty belt?" I'd taken it off. That was the way he was, always pushing you to be your best. Anyway, I checked him out, all that, got off duty, went to bed.

I got woken up at eleven or so in the morning, a Marine shook me awake. I look up at him and he looks down—I saw it in his eyes... that disappointment. He says, "Convoy got hit. Sergeant's dead." I just sat up. Couldn't believe it. He told me another Marine took shrapnel in his leg, up into his artery. CO took some shrapnel. It was surreal.

I got up, got the guys together to lead a prayer group, give the guys a chance to say whatever they needed to say. I visited the CO

to see if he was okay. He just nodded. Couldn't say anything. It was weird, happened so quick, everybody was just like, "Whoa."

[Beat.]

Yeah. That was the reality of it.

I had to take his gear, the First Sergeant's gear—I was in charge of small weapons—I had to clean his gear, his weapon, get all the blood off it, his holster, all the blood off. Now it's the weapon I hold, every day, even in training. I'll take it back to Iraq with me, have his holster as well; it's just weird, somebody you see every day. So surreal.

[Silence.]

But you carry on.

[He rises.]

We had a couple sandstorms, like those big walls, you've seen that stuff? So huge—touches the heavens. It's like *The Mummy*, just this wall of sand, you feel like a face is going to appear out of it or something—I swear to God, I saw a face coming out of it. The first one, I was lookin' at it and thinkin', "How fast is that moving?" Then I see these three guys, Marines, way off down there just hoofin' it to get some shelter. I've got my camera out, I'm looking, thinkin' this is gonna make a good shot, following them along.

All the sudden, "Whoof!" they just disappear. Gone. Swallowed up. Just like that.

[Beat, smiling at the memory.]

Disappeared.

[Exit Jeremy, Josh, and Shane. Christina steps downstage.]

Christina

“Planting, Hayhurst Farm,” a poem by Elyse Fenton.*

A week since the last bombing
brought you to your knees, since

the day you spent shoveling
human remains into a body bag

marked for home. I don’t know
what to say. Neither of us has slept.

But today, planting peppers
on a farm in Oregon nowhere near

the war, I found myself mid-way
down a row, on all fours, hands

breaking open the rocky clods,
coaxing the flimsy necks to stand.

It felt like an exercise
in good faith—my fingers

blindly plunging, a brief tenderness
exacted on every stalk.

Some didn’t make it through
our rough caging, some will never

bear fruit. I don’t know
if this is even meant as consolation

but I want to tell you just how easy
it became to plant the thin bodies

in the ground, to mound up
the dense soil and move on.

*First published in *Natural Bridge*.

[At the end of the poem, the cast enters, taking positions upstage, making the motions of gardening. Christina exits, and the rest of the cast follows in turn.]

. . .

Jason

Sailor of the Day—you get some perks. I mean, the next port of call, you get to be the first off the ship. Before the officers or anyone.

Ports of call, man. Those are fun. That's where my buddy Chris came up with the phrase, "Itty Bitty Moments." I mean, you deal with forty-five days of bullshit out to sea. You deal with the same group of guys. You're always fighting, always putting up with bullshit...and then you get that itty bitty moment when you're drinking a beer sitting in a bar in Hong Kong, or you're sitting on a beach in Singapore, smoking a cigar. Those are the itty bitty moments. For a lot of the time in the Navy that's what you lived for, ports of call: when you could do what you *weren't* being paid to do.

Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong, Guam, Korea, we stopped in China, a couple of different ports in Japan. They were all fun. I mean, Hong Kong, it's a dirty city, but if you wanna have a good time, Hong Kong's the place to do it. First time in Hong Kong I spent the entire five days without sleep. First night we went out, had a couple of beers at this Australian bar, and there was this girl who worked there. Went back the next day and made friends with her. I remembered her name and my buddy asked if her and her friend wanted to go out afterwards and she said sure.

So we decided to go to this after-hours bar and there was this bad-ass live band. They played everything. We danced for a little while. Me and one of the Australian girls, her name was Crystal, we danced more than anybody else danced because I was pretty lit, you know, I was out of it.

So, we were dancing, and all of a sudden all of the people started to clear out so that it was just me and Crystal on the dance floor. And they were all in a big circle, cheerin' us on. And then the band started to play this Latin music. So when I was in Florida, this girl had taught me how to do some salsa dancing. So I grabbed Crystal and we started salsa dancing and everyone standing around clapped.

And after the salsa song they played funky George Clinton kinda stuff, you know, that pow-chi-ka-pow-pow.

So me and Crystal we split up and we're doing our little dance and everyone's clapping and hollering. And I took her, and I spun her across the room and she's on the other side of the room and I stopped. And I looked at my buddy Chris, and I...

[Exhales excitedly and shakes his head, before casting an imaginary fishing line.]

It was the only time...it was like a movie, because she caught that fish hook...

[He pulls at the inside of his cheek with his index finger and drags himself across the stage.]

...and dragged herself across the room.

[Beat.]

It was great. That was one of them itty bitty moments. Because after all the bullshit, nothing really mattered except that I was dancing with a beautiful Australian girl in a bar in Hong Kong.

...

Jason

It's quiet now.

Shirley

It's quiet.

Steve

Not used to quietness.

Shirley

I know, right? It's always loud.

Jason

I can't sleep when I'm off the ship now.

Steve

You get used to the noise of the engines and the shaking of the rack. It literally shakes your rack.

Jason

You get used to it after six months.

Shirley

And then you get back and you lay down, and you think something's off, you think something's not quite right. I don't know how long that'll take.

...

Shirley

I was an electronic weapons elevator technician in the Navy from 1997 to 2001. I had experiences. But they weren't all good experiences. If that's okay.

I was on Westpac when the SS Cole was bombed. Actually, we were about sixty miles from the coast of Yemen, where it happened.

There's this superstition...I think it's a Mexican Indian superstition. What it says is that if you see an owl during the daylight, death is coming or death is near. So it was really strange the day that the Cole got bombed, because we were pretty close and, um, I was down in one of the spaces, I dunno, one of the engine rooms, and I stuck my head out for something and one of my friends yells to me. He's like, "Hey Stevenson"—I was married at the time—he's like, "Hey Stevenson, come check this out." So I go over there and I check my head out the side of the ship and it was just really, really strange, because there was an owl, and it was perched on the side of the ship. It was so strange, but it was there, I swear, and it freaked me out really bad.

So when they told us that the Cole had got bombed, and I think we heard there were eight people dead and it ended up there were seventeen, I just remembered that owl and it freaked me out because, I mean, I knew that these people had just died and every-

thing, but I was like, does this mean something's going to happen to us too?

They were waiting in line when it happened. Chow line. They're just waiting to eat and, one of the people that died that day, she was my age, and I remember she'd just found out that she was pregnant. And I remember thinking, "I bet they didn't wake up that morning and think, 'Mm. This is a good day to die.'"

[Beat.]

Am I not being open enough for you? I'm sorry. Okay.

So, there was this officer on board my previous ship. A young officer...a prior enlisted guy. And I remember I was standing a watch. I think it was a balls-to-four watch, which is like twelve to four, right? So it's really dark. And I was smoking a cigarette on the side...on the vestibule alongside the ship, that's right. And, um, he's walking up. And I'd seen him before. No big deal. And he tells me...he starts talking to me.

He says, "You know, Stevenson..."

I say, "What?"

He says, "How you doing tonight?"

I say, "Oh fine, sir. Blah blah," you know.

He says, "You have a good night."

And I'm like, "Okay."

And I start to walk off and he stops me. And it's dark.

And he says, "You know what, Stevenson, I have to tell you something..."

I say, "What?"

He says, "I know I'm probably gonna break about fifty laws of the UCMJ right now, but every time you walk past me," he goes, "every time you walk past me, my heart goes BOOM BOOM BOOM. I want to do crazy nasty things to you. And you know what? Nobody will find out, because I'm the boss."

And I just looked at him...my eyes got about this big...because I think he was married too, and I was just thinking, "Are you insane? I can't believe you are saying this to me." I thought this was only done in like, the movies. I really had never had anyone speak to me that way before. I didn't know what to do about it.

So I just laughed, “Hahaha.” I just laughed at him and I’m like, “Ahaha, you’re so funny!” I didn’t know what to do.

So I just said, “You have a good night, sir,” and I went down to my berthing and I told about three other girls what he had said to me, just in case, because I was afraid, since I wasn’t going to do that with him, if he was going to try to retaliate. I didn’t know.

After that, I never saluted him again. And he never said anything about it.

[Beat.]

Wow, I’m making this sound really horrible, but it really wasn’t. I had such fun. I enjoyed my time on the Chancellorsville. Just the friends I met on board that ship, I loved it. For example, the cooks would always make sure that...well, if we were having burritos they’d make sure my tortillas were fresh and hot. But then, I hard-wired their meat grinders and fixed their rack lights so they could read. So it wasn’t like...

And I like to sing. I’m always singing. So we’d go out to the fantail at night. You know, the back of the ship that drags through the water? So I used to like to stand like this and I’d lean over the railing...And I liked to watch the ship cut through the water because the algae would glow. And then, my gosh, you haven’t seen stars like the stars out to sea at night. So pretty, so pretty. So I’d stand out there with my guy friends...because most of my friends were guys—I was one of maybe thirty women aboard because the ship had only just been fitted for women—and we’d talk about stuff. You know, whatever. It was just nice. I felt close to them. I had fun with those people.

And I’d sing to them. And they liked it.

[She sings. The rest of the cast joins her on stage. They sing too and break into the formations that move us into the third act.]

ACT THREE

[A kitchen / dining room / living room scene. All of the veterans are together. Occupying the center of the stage are Jeremy, Jason,

and Christina, hands making the motions of cooking. Josh, Sean, and Justin are playing computer games. Shirley, Patrice, Shane, and Steve stand to one side of the stage, having a beer, chatting.]

Jason

[talking to Christina and Jeremy, facing the audience]

I always say that joining the Navy was the best worst decision of my life. Because for four years of my life, other than itty-bitty moments, I didn't enjoy it. One of the things I hated was the monotony. You had a routine. You stick to that routine. If you break with that routine, shit gets fucked up. That kind of routine...

I remember once I was working on my father's ranch and I was working a field and I got off the tractor and I said to my father, "You know, I really love doing that. It gives me time to think." And my father said, "You know, that's a good thing, but sometimes you can think way too much."

And that's what it was like on the ship. Sometimes you can think way too much. You're thinking, why am I here? What are these bombs for? Why am I friends with this guy?

[Beat.]

All stuff like that. Trivial things you don't wanna be thinking about. And when you think too much, I mean it drove me nuts when I was getting out. I think that's half the reason I had trouble acclimating myself once I got out...the ship...during a time of war...it's too much time to think, it's too much of nothing.

...

Jeremy

I don't even watch the news anymore. I get too angry, too frustrated. I mean, I really care what's happening with people over there, believe me, I do. And I really care about what's happening with the troops.

[Beat.]

I mean, there's roughly two hundred thousand people in the Marines, double that in the Army. That's a small percentage of the population that signs a contract. Every single one of them knows what they're gettin' into, everybody volunteers. While they're signing they're told, and by the way, sign who would be your death beneficiary. And everybody does that, whether it be the Reserves or the National Guard or active duty. What kind of job is that?

They get paid shit, they live in substandard conditions. That's okay, they chose to do it. I mean, "I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against enemies foreign and domestic." It's quite an oath that they have to take. But they all volunteer to do it.

Don't get me wrong—everyone is entitled to their opinion. But a lot of people don't understand.

[Beat]

They make documentaries on what's happening, they push their own agendas, and they show dead Marines to do it. And not just their coffins, but their bodies. Those are *my* friends. They're *my* brothers.

[Silence. Josh crosses to embrace his brother.]

...

Josh

You know, it's funny. I can still remember every ditch and divot and HESCO and rock and barricade and can. I can tell you the shortest way to get from the can to the crack tower where I worked. I can tell you how to get to the chow hall from anywhere on base. I can see it and feel the blow-dryer heat blowing on me, the 120 degrees with no humidity with forty-mile-an-hour winds and sand—I can hear it and smell it and see it and feel it.

Justin Love

[to Josh, moving downstage]

In the last year, I met my father who was drafted into Vietnam. He spent most of the years since in the bottom of a bottle. Now he's a devout Christian. We're talking about entire lives altered permanently. I didn't see my father for some twenty-seven-odd years. He just couldn't get his head together.

Shane

It doesn't have to be that way. When I was a freshman, my grades weren't great, I wasn't that into studying and stuff—I didn't really know what I was doing in school. But when I got back, I started seeing this as a source of knowledge; I was much more serious after having that experience over there, like this education was something that I was goin' to put to use. That was different.

Looks like we'll be headin' back, though. Yeah, that's the word through the grapevine. Nothin' definite, but you get a sense of it from the COs. So, it'll be another year or so before I can finish out.

It's good, though. Lookin' forward to it. I'm good to go.

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